

TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

EA SERIES: THE CONTEMPERARY EA

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SAM PALMER:

Yuma, hello, and welcome to today's event. My name is Sam Palmer and I'm privileged to lead Australia's visitor economy and client programmes division, and to also be a member of the IPAA ACT council. So I'm going to open today and hand over to our host Edwin, EDWIN ANDERSON, the advisor quad at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. So first I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land upon which we're meeting today, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people. For IPAA, we acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to life in this city and this region, and I personally thank them for their love, care, and custodianship of this wonderful landscape. Look at how beautiful it is. I'd also like to extend respect as well today to all the First Nations people who are here.

So now I would like to introduce our chair, Edwin Anderson. Edwin is currently an advisor in the department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. He previously served as the executive advisor to Secretary PM&C from 2021 to 2023, supporting two secretaries and two governments working alongside the indefatigable... It's a hard... How about I just say wonderful, that just works better for me. It's been a long day and I'm a middle-aged woman in perimenopause, people. All right, Ms. Bev Sims, PSM. So please join me in welcoming Edwin.

EDWIN ANDERSON:

Thanks, Sam, and hello everyone. Sorry for putting that word in there, Sam. I thought that might be a bit of fun to start the evening. I would also like to echo Sam's acknowledgement of country and tonight I think we will pay homage to the rich indigenous history of storytelling and knowledge sharing through our panel here tonight. Hopefully share a few stories or two that I'm really excited to hear. Before we begin, we asked if Bev's old boss, secretary Gwyn Davis might say something, because he would be here if not for a meeting where he had to in fact travel overseas not because he had to avoid Bev, but because he had other business. I also make very terrible jokes. So please bear with me for the whole night.

Glyn asked me to convey the following message. "Bev, thank you again for all your support and guidance as I navigated the APS in the first year here in the department of PM&C. I'm sorry I can't be at your panel tonight, but I know that the insights you will share with the EAs in the room will be invaluable and very much welcomed. You have made an immeasurable contribution to the Australian Public Service over the

last four decades, and your dedication was never combined just to the demands of working for the secretary. Your passion extended to your role as senior EA and mentor to EAs across PM&C and the APS. You used your experience and position to highlight the contribution every EA makes and were always generous in sharing your wisdom to further strengthen that contribution. You continue on that mission this evening and I commend you again for your service. I hope you are enjoying your well-deserved break with your family and puppy George," who I don't think is a puppy no longer, no. '.

So without further ado, I'd like to introduce our wonderful panel to the stage. First up, Bev Sims. Bev joined the department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in April 2017 as executive assistants to the secretary. During her six-year term, she supported three secretaries, Martin Parkinson, Phil Gachens, and the current secretary Glen Davis. Previously Bev had worked as EA to secretaries at the Department of the Treasury and the former Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency. Bev enjoyed her varied and challenging roles and is thankful for those opportunities. However, she continually found herself returning to her career as an EA, a role which is her passion and which she enjoys above all. Others, please join me in welcoming Bev to the stage.

Our next panellist, Rhana Crago. Rana has over 20 years' experience as a senior executive assistant in the Australian Public Service and is currently EA to Dr. Gordon de Brower, the Australian Public Service Commissioner. Prior to joining Dr. De Brower and his team, Rana supported consecutive secretaries at the Department of Finance and Health. In 2017, Rhana was awarded a public service medal for her outstanding service in the role of executive assistant in the health and finance portfolios. Rana is a proud member of the IPAA EA series committee and is passionate about the executive assistant role. Please join me in welcoming Rhana to the stage.

Our next panellist, Jack Dolan. Jack has worked in the Australian Public Service for over 13 years, having worked in EA and EO positions for the last nine years. During his career, he has supported senior executives at all levels and in diverse areas including superannuation, medical benefits, aged care, and health protection. Jack is currently the executive assistant to the secretary of the Department of Health and Aged Care, a position which he has occupied since July 2020. Please join me in welcoming Jack to the stage.

And our last panellist tonight, Linda Semmler. Linda commenced in her role of EA to the Secretary of

Department of Home Affairs in April 2019. In 2015 and 2017, Linda was nominated for executive assistant of the year in both defence and the then Department of Immigration and Border Protection. She was awarded a secretary and commissioner commendation in 2017 for her support to the Intelligence and Capability Group. Please join me in welcoming Linda to the stage. Thank you everyone for being here. I've got a few questions for each of you, but they're not tough questions, don't worry, and keen to make this more of a fireside chat as Jack pointed out, as the public have jargon going around these days. So very much welcome contributions from everyone. Firstly, Bev, how are you?

BEV SIMS: I'm good, thank you.

EDWIN ANDERSON: That's good.

RHANA CRAGO: She's retired, of course she's good.

EDWIN ANDERSON: Gosh. Bev, I'm keen to talk about EA recruitment and retention, and over your career as an EA over many years you would've seen quite a bit of change to the role and the workforce generally. I'm keen to hear your thoughts on how EAs, no matter what their level, can maximise their growth opportunities, and given the challenges of attracting and retaining good EAs, what advice would you have for workplaces to better identify talent and support for our EAs?

BEV SIMS: Thanks, Ed. Just wanted to first say that each EA role is very different, so once established, we all have opportunities to make the position our own. So I think it's quite unique in that phase. For me, maximising opportunities at all levels, the key to that is understanding the business that we support. So that can include things like reading briefs and materials that come into our executives' office, reading their emails. Now I know that not all executives are keen to share their emails initially because there is this trust element, but I think it's really critical to work with them to allay any concerns they might have about how you treat the material and how you will handle it, because it is key that you see what's coming in so you can help them to prioritise their work. So I think in tandem you could work with them if there is a reluctance to encourage them to allow that access to both emails and other materials that come in.

I'd also encourage you to read corporate information and any staff messages from the secretary or other senior managers. This will give you a good understanding of the work and priorities of the department, and on a fundamental level to actually review the organisational chart and see where various

areas of the department fit in, particularly your own division and branch. But it's really helpful for you to be able to redirect people or to make linkages when you're organising meetings if you understand who has responsibility for what within the organisation. But most importantly, it's understanding your own division and branches, who's responsible for what, where the responsibilities sit, and overall what the primary responsibility of your work area is. Because this helps you to allocate work and to ensure the right people are connected into either meetings or to information that's coming through.

And wherever possible I would encourage you to attend corporate activities or all staff meetings, branch meetings and divisional meetings, particularly the ones around planning, because that helps you to be able to prioritise if you actually understand the work of your area. And it's not always easy to make those meetings or there might be a hesitancy to invite you if the material is more technical, but at a minimum I would encourage you to get a debrief, perhaps from your executive officer or someone else that's attended the meeting if you're unable to attend yourself.

All of these tools, once you understand the business will make your job in supporting your executives so much more well-informed. And the other critical thing for me is to ask work colleagues. If you see a brief come in, some of them, they are technical, but ask questions. Time when you're asking those questions. You don't want to do it when it's really busy or time sensitive, but it's really important for you to have your own reading so you've got a basic understanding, and then that shows that you're keenly interested and that you do have a basic understanding rather than starting from the fundamentals. My other key would be to always look for opportunities. So it does take time to build trust, but once you have that trust and you have developed skills, always look out for where you might add value, and that's a conversation working with your executive on what those opportunities might be, speaking with the team. But once you've established what the business is of the organisation or your area, then that will make that job so much easier because you can start anticipating what those opportunities might be.

The other key for me is scanning the horizon. So we plan for the day ahead and of course things shift all the time, but I would encourage you not just to scan... Not prepare just for the next day, but for the next week or the next month. And as things shift and change, continually scan the horizon to see where the arrangements that you've made that day may not be applicable in a week or a day or an hour later. So the key I always was just always reviewing what the work

that I'd prepared for. And the other one is obviously that's a fundamental is communication. Communicating with your SES, and I think Jack's going to talk in more detail about the partnership between you and your executive. But open lines of communication, regular meetings, that's critical, whether it's with your executive or whether it's also with your executive officer or others in the area. I'd encourage you to keep those communication lines always open.

On the recruitment and retention, we all know how tight the current market is and it has been difficult over the years to attract and retain EAs. So I think we need to look more and be more open about the types of people that we recruit. One, how do we attract them to look at the ad in the first place? They're looking at our language, being the public service, we have certain terms that we use over and over again. Think outside that box. If you're a receptionist out there and you see a job, they may think, "Oh, I'm not really qualified." So I think if you look beyond the traditional skillset that we had, we can attract really good people that have very transferable skills. So I think the actual recruitment process, we can all look to enhance or review what we're doing and try and broaden our field.

And the other thing is to think critically about the types of skills that we're after, particularly at the entry level EA. If we do attract people with those transferable skills, then we will be able to train them up. But I don't think we should necessarily rule them out if they don't have some executive assistant background. And when we do recruit them, the key is to retain them, because our skills are very valuable, and I know I've competed with other areas of the department and other areas across the public service to retain our good EAs, and that's because they are so highly sought after.

So it's key that we continue to work to retain, and sometimes that can be challenging given we have our own busy lives to do, but we have to make sure when they arrive, they have a good induction, that we have ongoing support mechanisms in place, whether that's informal mentoring or formal mentoring. They have the resources available to find the information they need, whether it's a resource pack which has linkages to the intranet, they have access to information that will help them inform. But also, it's important to do that in partnership with the SES and I think it's particularly the new SES who may not know how effective an EA can be. So that really is working with the SES on saying, "Well, here's an opportunity. You've got someone there that's got all these skills, we want to maximise it and want to work with you to make sure that we not only attract this person, retain them, but they also grow and develop and grow to love the EA role as I have."

EDWIN ANDERSON:

Thanks, Bev. I want to go back to talking what you said before about being situationally aware of your environment, going to planning days. Because one of the great things I've witnessed in the presence of Bev Sims is the gut feel test of whether this meeting reaches the threshold to actually put it in the diary, or whether this brief needs to go right now or what's important, what's not important. I'm wondering if you could talk about that and how long it took you to develop that in new roles. What can EAs do to develop that?

BEV SIMS:

Yep. It does take time, and I think the key is developing trust with your executive. And I always give myself 12 months to establish that sort of relationship, to really understand them, for them to understand me, but also understand the value that I can add to their lives. So the threshold is something that comes with experience, and I think... I'd encourage you to take risks, but those risks need to be measured. So you don't want to set yourself up for failure because you're pushing too far or making decisions on behalf of your executive that aren't quite right, because you don't have the knowledge and experience to make an informed decision. So be patient, but also don't use as an excuse not to take risks, measured risks, I think everyone does that and the APS values encourage us to take risks, but the important thing for me is when you do make a mistake, own it and learn from it.

And I know throughout my career I have made lots of mistakes, and at the time my executive wasn't very... I'm sure they weren't very happy with the situation. Neither was I. Wasn't happy that I'd made a mistake, but because I had taken that risk, because I acknowledged it, because I learned from it, they were prepared to give me more opportunities. So as that time goes on, the risks become less and the greater the opportunity. So it's a risk reward. But as I said, be kind to yourself and it is really working with your executive to reach that point where you both feel comfortable with you making decisions on their behalf with the priority of this meeting, who should be in attendance, what they might need for that. So you do develop that anticipation, but it takes time, and it takes experience. So look out for other people with more experience to guide and nurture you.

EDWIN ANDERSON:

Thanks, Bev. And quite a good segue into our next question on leadership. Linda, I'm interested to hear about EAs in a real unique position where they can represent the senior executive's interests, but also, they can really influence and guide the development of the next generation of EAs. In your role as EA to the secretary, what advice would you give to EAs empower

them to lead in their role, including the skills that can help them to become a member of the leadership team?

LINDA SEMMLER:

Thanks, Edwin. Look, first of all, I just want to ask the audience, because I think it's a difficult thing to grasp leadership because I think we just all get on and do our jobs, and I just don't think we think of leadership. So just a quick little one, because I'm just considering you're all my besties by the way, because I don't want to be up here, my little heart's racing. So who here thinks that they're a leader? Nice. Well, if you're all EAs, then you probably should be thinking that you are leaders, because you are. You're in the unique position of being an EA. And with that comes the... Well, it's like a responsibility to set the tone for an office that you're in, to be that person in the office who is the calm, collected... They can't see underneath, of course your little feet are running around underneath, but you're the calm, collected person who has the nice personality and just greets people.

I guess you all have come across the EA in your career who, and some at the very senior levels, who aren't very pleasant and who you're afraid to go and speak to and you don't want to be around. I don't think anyone in this room wants to be that person, and I think we learned from that that isn't the right person to be as a leader. So if we look at the dictionary definition, the action of leading a group of people or an organisation. A bit bland really, isn't it? And I suppose you would say that that's all your bosses. They all get up and they're the leaders and they lead the groups, lead the department, they do all of that work. And you probably don't really look at yourself as a leader. But you are. Because if you put it into a different term, you say, and I'm going to read from this because the PM can, so I'm going to read from paper, leadership is an ability to influence and guide members of a team.

So if we put it like that, that's our job. We're there and we're guiding. We're guiding people that come into the office, we're guiding junior EAs, we're guiding anyone that needs some support and some help with our office, and we want them to feel comfortable and we want them to come to us and we want to be a pleasant person. Nothing more important, I think, than being a nice person to deal with in an office. I get up every day wanting to go to work. If you get up one day and you don't want to go to work, you have to seriously ask yourself, "Is this the job for me?" But if you love your job, you'll come to work, and you want to be there, and it'll be a pleasant day every day that you go there.

EAs are natural born leaders. If you're in the job and you love your job and that's what you want to do in your career, you are a natural born leader. And that's as

simple as that. And the skills that you bring to that job as a leader by being able to set the tone for the office and just be able to lead with positivity, to be able to show the right way to do things is just gold. And particularly for the junior levels, you need to set the tone for the junior levels, because if you're doing it a certain way, they'll do it a certain way, and that's how it'll all become good for the future, because those junior EAs are probably the secretary and dep secretary EAs of the future. So we want them to learn the right way, not the wrong way. So important there.

So there's lots of resources. I think it's important too that we never stop learning. So we might get to a point in our career, and we think, "I know everything. I know everything that there is to know." There's lots and lots of resources that we can reach out to. There are online resources, there's courses that you can go and do. There are some EA courses that you can go and do which cost a bomb. I mean, you must see some of those EA things that come out like 2 and \$3,000. Well, none of our budgets really cater for that, but it's important to keep learning so many online resources. Even good old Google. You can go on Google and find lots of really, really good leadership. So I did a quick little Google, five qualities of a good leader, integrity, self-awareness, courage, respect, empathy. We need empathy. It's very important to be empathetic to... Is that the right word? Empathy.

To show empathy to people that come to us. Often, they're frantic, they don't know what they're doing. They need somebody to guide them. And that's what your job is. That's our job as a leader. We guide them. And gratitude. It's always good to be in a role where you're being helpful, pleasant, and happy and just, again, it sets the tone for the office. Know your content. Really, really important to know your content. If you're going to be seen as a positive person, a positive leader in your area, people come to you, and they ask questions and they want to know the answer. And if you know the content and you give them the answer that they want, you're going to get that respect. Instantly you'll get that respect. And if you don't know the answer, don't just say to them, "Oh, I don't know what the answer is." Go and find the answer. Tell them, "I'll come back to you. That can't be too hard to find out. I'll find that out for you, and I'll come back to you."

Because a lot of the times, like in the secretary office for example, you've got deputies coming to you more so than even the FASes. They're busy, and sure they've got EAs, but there might be a reason that they're coming across to me to ask that question. And I won't ever send anyone away without answering the question. I will find the answer, I will send emails, I will call up, I will get the answer. If somebody's got their IT

problem, and who doesn't have an IT problem, story of our lives, I will resolve it. I will find somebody where I can resolve it. And that's a leader. So we want to be able to help people resolve things, get them on the track, off to do their job. Because they've got pretty important jobs and they're busy and that's what we're there for.

Step outside your comfort zone. There's a lot of people that just go to work, do their job, and don't grow into the confidence level that's required to be a leader. I so don't want to be here right now. This is not my comfort zone. If I could walk down there and get somebody else to come up here, I would do it right now. And the way you get out of your comfort zone is just little things like volunteer for things like this. I didn't do it for that, I did it for Bevvv. But even saying hello to somebody in the lift. Don't you love that awkward silence when you get into the lift and you're all standing there and nobody talks to anyone, you say, "How are you today?" It just gets you out of your comfort zone. You get a little bit more confident, and that's what you want as a leader. You want to grow your confidence, and the more confident you are, the more your content, it'll all flow in and you'll become a great leader.

So say hello to somebody you wouldn't normally speak to. Speak up in meetings and share your ideas. If you go to the meetings, the EA doesn't need to sit in the corner and do very little. They don't need to just take the minutes or write down the notes. If you've got something to say, you can say it if you know your content and if you're respectful about it and you deliver it in the right way. So it's always good to have your say if the forum allows. You will know, you can read the room, and if there's a right place to say it. Don't be afraid to ask for something. People aren't... They're just wired to say yes. It is easier to say yes. People actually don't like saying no. So if you need something, ask for it. 9 times out of 10 you'll get it.

And just finally, just onto, and this is a very... I shouldn't say finally because this is very important. I did touch on it at the beginning. You're not just a leader in your office. You, especially the dep sec EAs and the FAS EAs, your leaders for the junior EAs that we have coming up. We've got our APS 3 EAs, we've got our APS 4 EAs. We find, and just touching on Bev's recruitment side of things, in Home Affairs we see a very, very high attrition rate at the junior level. People come in, they work for a short amount of time, and then they're off into the line areas. It's almost like they use it as a bit of a stepping stone to get into the department.

And you can sort of understand it a little bit because there's not as much opportunity to go up into the high levels. But support them, speak to them, take them

under your wing, give them as much support as you can to help them grow in their role, and then they'll start to like it a bit more. And if you're a good role model like we were talking about before, then you're setting the right tone.

Mentoring, very important. If you can look into some mentoring opportunities, most of the departments I would say offer mentoring opportunities. Even if you don't, you can just do unofficial and informal mentoring. If you've got an EA you could say, "Do you need some help? Would you like to have a chat?" And just get on board like that. I've got a mentor, and we catch up as best we can. We don't work in the same areas, but it's really nice to just get that little bit of guidance going when we can. And finally, I'm going to ask you another question. Who now thinks they're leaders? Has anyone changed their mind? I need more hands than that, come on. All right, I think you're all leaders, so thank you.

EDWIN ANDERSON:

Thanks Linda. And that's great to hear about how... I really liked what you said about how EAs can drive the culture and that not only affects the culture of your office, your branch, or division, but it also affects the work outcomes as well, and backed up by knowledge it's a really powerful thing. Moving on to the relationships aspect of being an EA, Jack, building relationships is part of an EAs DNA, also the notes say here, the most fundamental of those being the relationship with your executive and other support staff. Jack, having worked with a few SES during your EA career, what are some strategies that have helped you to develop effective and trusted relationships with your SES and particularly their support staff?

JACK DOLAN:

Thanks, Ed. I was having a quick think of or reflection on my career this afternoon. The first thing that sprung to my mind when you are supporting SES, this could be either a new SES, you could find yourself moving to another EA job, supporting someone brand new. I can't stress the importance enough of having an initial conversation with them just to really understand what their preferences are. This is particularly important if you could have found yourself jumping around a number of SES for whatever reason. Each SES is going to have their own quirks, their own preferences, and styles of how they would like to work. So if you have the opportunity, and I'd really empower you to, if there's anyone in the room that this is resonating with, to really put forward the idea of having an initial conversation, it can really just set you up and to build a really good foundation to really make that partnership start to gel.

Sometimes there may not be the time to have an initial

conversation. If your SES is coming into a new department, for example, you might be very time poor having to get them onboarded and everything. If you are in that scenario, I'd probably just suggest proceeding as you would be working for a previous SES, but always making sure that you are having that opportunity to get their feedback, making sure that what you're delivering, if you haven't had the opportunity to have that initial conversation, making sure that your actions are aligning with what their expectations are for you.

In that vein, you do have to be prepared to be flexible and open to different ways of working. A number of us, including myself, could be going through this at the moment, and it just goes back to that point where each SES will have their own preferences that we as EAs, our job is to support them, so we need to really understand what they're wanting from us. But yes, so do be prepared to be flexible, be adaptable. I think that's such a core quality of being an EA. I think intrinsically we do have that within us already, but it really comes to the fore if you are supporting or trying to cultivate and build that new relationship with an SES.

The next thing I thought about was if you're in a new working partnership with an executive, it's really vital to be true to your word. If you say that you're going to deliver something or if you've been requested or tasked to do something, really try to hit the mark on that because then they'll reflect on that and go, "wow, Rhana really hit the mark with that. She said she was going to get me this by this time, and I've got it. It's fantastic." I'm under no illusion that different priorities can come up. We're constantly juggling various priorities. If something is going to impact a commitment that you've given, you really need to communicate what has changed and communicate it early as well. I'm a big believer, and what served me quite well in my career is I operate under the guise of there's no surprises. I'm really an open book with my executive. The sooner that they know if something's changed and what the reasons are, the better. So you do need to be on the front foot in that aspect.

Looping back to Bev's point before, if you are in a new working relationship with an executive, you really do need to be prepared to give it time. I completely agree with Bev that it really does take 12 months, at a bare minimum 9 months, 9 to 12 months I think, to really find that groove, to really understand what makes your executive tick, what their priorities are. And all of this just comes with time. So there will be bumps in the road, but we just have to be resilient and just go... Everyone's going to have a crappy day, right? There's no EA in the room that would say, "Oh, I go to work and everything's perfect every day. Everything goes to

plan." It just doesn't happen. So you really have to be prepared to just ride the bumps along the way and then you will just start to fall into that groove.

I would like to just briefly talk about if a relationship is just not working. You've found yourself working to an SES and you've got a feeling that just something's not clicking, it's not gelling. I've worked for a number of SESs, as Ed said previously in the introduction. Some have really hit that relationship very well, very quickly with, some have become sort of extended members my family, but others have also... It's been strictly just a professional working relationship and that's okay, that's fine. You're not going to have that close relationship with every senior executive that you support.

As I was getting into if you do find yourself that you've just got a gut feeling that it's just not gelling as quickly as you'd like it to, or if you've just got a feeling that something's off, emotional intelligence is key. I'm a big believer, again, that intrinsically we do have a high emotional intelligence within us as support staff. Pick up on those signs early. See if you can really nip things in the bud. The longer that things are... Or if you have that feeling, the longer that's left to kind of fester, it potentially could build, and it could really sour a relationship and you might have an opportunity to steer the ship around the sooner that you address those feelings if they're there.

If you are going to have a conversation with your executive about a gut feeling that you've got, really just be mindful about when you're going to broach this topic with them. It goes back to understanding your SES and how they work, what makes them tick. I think we all know when we're going to get a better outcome for what we're trying to achieve with our SES. If they're a morning person, if they operate better in the morning, hit them up then. If they're not a morning person, then don't hit them up then. But you know what I mean. It's all about understanding the appropriate time, having the finger on the pulse to think, "Oh, it's been a bit of a stressful day. Now's definitely not the time to raise this type of topic."

If you are going to have this conversation, just be prepared to go in with examples and try to take the emotion out of it as much as you can, because it is a very high-pressure environment if you are going to have that conversation. But you can always just say, "Look, I understand that you are trying to achieve X. I thought I was also on this path trying to deliver this for you, but this is what happened, and this is what prevented, or this is what changed the outcome from what we are originally both planning to do." So do have the examples up your sleeve if you do find yourself having to have those conversations.

Know when to call it quits as well if you do think that you've tried everything in your sort of repertoire that you can. Again, this is a complete last resort, and I would, again, harping back to the 12-month thing, I really do think you need to give it that time, because I think SES know that we're here to support them. And I think if you're in this scenario and struggling to find that groove, the sooner you can have the conversation, the better. I'd like to think that 9 times out of 10 that would change the course of that relationship, but also there might be a time where you need to say, "Look, thank you for the opportunity, but I need to explore something else."

Just lastly about... I'd like to talk about the EA and the EO relationship. I'm sure a lot of us in the room have either worked with EOs previously or currently do work with EOs. I see it as a crucial partnership. As EAs it's impossible to do everything ourselves, particularly if you're at the FAS, dep sec, or secretary level. We just can't do everything ourselves. So I do see the EA and the EO relationship really crucial to the running of a successful office if you're at that level where your executive has an EO that you work with. Again, you might find that you have an instant connection with the EO that you're working with, and it could be smooth sailing and happy days. And if you are in that scenario, then that's fantastic.

In the event that you're not, at the end of the day it comes down... Someone mentioned respect earlier. You might not necessarily have a friendship with the colleague that you're working with, but you do both have to respect each other and the positions that you're working to with your executive. I wrote down here, "Communicate, communicate, communicate." It sounds like sometimes we are flogging a dead horse when we're saying about communication, but really it goes back to what I was talking about before about having the initial conversation with your executive. You can also do that with your EO. Understand how they like to work, see how it aligns with how you like to work, and if you need to change anything to then achieve that common goal by supporting your executive... An example, an EO that I previously worked with, we had the conversation upfront. We made a mutual decision that we would CC each other into everything. I know some people might be thinking, "Oh God, too many emails, don't, don't don't."

But we had an understanding that if we were just CCing each other into something, it's not something that we had to action, it was purely if we were interested in the topic that we would have some understanding of what each other was working on. Because I'm a big believer with the relationship with your EO, it shouldn't be a, "I do diary, I'm the EA, I do this, I will only stick in this

lane." And similarly, I don't believe the EOs should be like that, having worked on the EO side of things. I think there does need to be... Whilst you'll have your own lanes to travel in, there should be some overlap so that if I happen to be away, I know that my EO, "Oh yes, Jack was organising that meeting on that day with these people. What do you need? I can try and help the best I can," and similarly, we can do that for our EO colleagues as well, and we should be too.

And I think lastly, the last one that I just had is just to really hone in on that point of we need to be flexible, we need to be adaptable. However, when you're dealing with your EO, to really build and forge that relationship. It should be a bit of a two-way street in terms of that flexibility and adaptability. So yeah, when it works, it works, but I definitely do understand if colleagues don't have that sort of blue-sky rainbows aspect, because I've had roles where I've connected with my SES and my EO instantly, but I've also had roles where I've had to really put in the work and have that good solid foundation to really hit the groove eventually.

EDWIN ANDERSON:

Jack, have you had a time where a relationship with an EO or an executive just didn't work?

JACK DOLAN:

Not that it didn't work... Yeah, I have. I did have to think about it. And I think that's where a lot of my reflections came down to, because I think so often, we do hear, "Oh, I get on great with my executive. They're the best executive I've ever worked with, as is my EO. Everything's great." But I have been in the situation where things just haven't panned out, and I gave it just over nine months, and I had tried everything that I could think of to try to mirror their personality, for example. In a previous life, I was a travel agent for flight centre, and I remember when they gave us sort of training on how to read your customer to kind of... Lure them in sounds a bit bad. But when you're trying to really close that sale.

And it's something that's really stuck with me in that if you've got someone that's really short, sharp to the point, you don't want to be kind of waffly and, "Oh, it's a really nice day outside," to someone who's really wanting to get to the nitty gritty of things. So I really just tried to adjust my style as much as I could to suit theirs. And look, it did work, but it was a hard slog. It was a hard slog. And I did have to reach the point where I did have to make a respectful exit and I had to move on to another opportunity because it didn't gel. It's a shame to say, but there's going to at times be those, not clashes, but just scenarios of when you don't instantly gel with someone. But as long as you can be respectful with how you're interacting, whether it's with your executive or your EO, respect is massive. But again,

just be prepared to have those conversations and have actual examples up your sleeve if that is something that is resonating with you at the moment.

EDWIN ANDERSON:

Thanks, Jack. I think it's great to know that everyone goes through difficult periods and even our esteemed panel as well, and hearing how, Linda, you were saying before that it's okay not to know things and having that humility as well to work through it and persevere. Finally, Ms. Rhana?

RHANA CRAGO:

Yes?

EDWIN ANDERSON:

Hello. In your role as EA to the commissioner of the public service, you are at the centre of the APS reform agenda. Now, I'm not going to ask you about the APS reform agenda, that can be done later. But keen to hear your reflections, talk about EAs as leaders, and the EA role will continue to evolve. So how can EAs start to imagine their roles to be future ready?

RHANA CRAGO:

So effectively you're asking me about how we change the way we work, and there's a huge amount of irony in asking me that question because anyone who knows me knows that I don't like change. And after working with my first boss for nearly 17 years, it was a huge shock to my system to change my work habits to work with a new boss. And even now more recently, I've had a couple of very quick changes. So I've had to dig very deep to figure out how I get through this thing. Now I'm sure most of you out here are really good at change, and then there'll be others that aren't. But I guess from my experience, I've now learned that it's not as daunting as I thought it was going to be.

I think if you just take a breath and realise that the future is a little unknown... We can't predict what the future's going to be. And right now, as you reflected on the reform programme, we are going through a period of change in the service. It's going to make the public service a better place to work. So trust me, trust the commissioner. I also think, and I don't like... A lot of people don't like going back to COVID. We kind of want to forget that COVID happened, but at the end of the day, there were positives that came out of COVID and that was that it threw us into a world that we would've gotten to eventually, but it happened a lot quicker than we expected. So we were going from working at our desks with a laptop and a phone to suddenly we're video conferencing from our lounge room sofas, from kitchen tables and things. So we did adapt very quickly under COVID.

I'm going back to when I first started my career where a phone was like a little mini switchboard, you had a great big chunky computer with one screen that was

this big. And this is not that long ago, people. I'm not trying to age myself. And then suddenly we're doing video calls, and we don't have a phone, we've got a headset. And if you'd said to me back when I first started my career that this was where we were going, I thought you've been watching some weird sci-fi, or for those of you who remember the Jetsons, you've been watching the Jetsons. So we have come a long way, and we change sometimes without even knowing that we're doing it.

I guess the thing is knowing how to embrace it and using various tools to help us progress through changes. I reflected on IT. We all love IT, and I'm really bad with IT. We know this, don't we, Ms. Billings Brown. IT, they're the mechanics, they're the systems that we use, that kind of stuff. That's the mechanics of our jobs. There are a lot of intangible aspects of our jobs that probably are a bit harder to change, our behaviours. Linda reflected on respect and empathy. Well, we all have. These are the things that are intangible, but we learn, and we adapt as we go, and we use these things to make our working relationships better.

I'm sort of trailing off here a bit. You mentioned the reform programme. So I think one of the things that the reform programme... Well, there are many, many things in the reform programme, but I just want to read off... And I'm going to read because I am still trying to get my head around, it's probably confusing a lot of people and probably scaring a lot of people that don't like change. So there are four key pillars of reform as part of the reform programme. We're looking to develop an APS that embodies integrity in everything we do. And I like to hope and think that we all have integrity with the work that we do, and we should have.

We put people and business at the centre of policy and services. I feel that that should be a bit of a no brainer, but if we want to reflect on, say, the recent issues with robo debt, I think there are ways that we lost our way. So we need to push forward and bring back that empathetic approach, that human approach to what we do. We're the Australian Public Service, we service the public. So we might have to rethink how we do that. We want the APS to be a model employer. Of course we do. And we also want to ensure that we have the capabilities to do our job well. So these are probably some of the things that you might hear as we go into reform.

Another word that keeps coming up, and I hear it about 150 times a day, is stewardship, and it's actually a great word. And Linda, I really liked when you reflected on leadership, that's part of stewardship, and we saw so few hands come up initially, but we are all leaders as everyone here will agree. You can be a leader at an

APS 3, 4, 5 level because you've got people that are going to look up to you just as we look up to our leaders. So stewardship and leadership are a really big part of the changes that I think are coming forward. I also think part of stewardship is taking a responsibility when you go into a role and thinking, "What can I do to make this role better?"

Now, that's not necessarily a reflection on who might've been in the role prior, it's just that we want to progress things and, in a way, perhaps we want to leave that role in a better place than when we found it. And again, I stress that's not a reflection on who was there before you. It's just progression. It's just the future of the role. It's making things better. We should all be striving and achieving or trying to achieve better in our role. And I think that that helps support the future generations that are coming up behind us.

Respect is a big one for me. I think, Jack, we all talk about respect. Any time I've spoken at anything, I always talk about respect. You need to have respect for your peers, you need to respect for your network, you need to build your networks. Networks are incredibly important because we can't do our jobs unless we have built up relationships with the people that we deal with frequently. I'm proud to say that I'm a member of the Secretary's EA group, of which Bev has done incredible work at fostering fabulous relationships. And in fact, I had somebody that was filling in my role recently who had to make a few calls to secretary's offices, and she was a bit scared about doing that, and she said to me when I came back, she said, "Oh my God, Rhana," she said, "they're also helpful and also friendly." And it's like, "Yes, we're not bad. We're okay."

And it's really important that you build up your networks with people because they're the people that are going to support you. When you are not too sure where to go or what to do you can pick up the phone and you can ring somebody just as you can support them when they're looking for advice. Recently the commissioner held a town hall meeting of all of the commission staff, and one of the things that I thought was really interesting was... It was a final point at the end of the meeting where one of the deputy commissioners was asked if there was one key thing or one key tool to assist with dealing with change. I thought, "Oh, this will be interesting." And the deputy commissioner said, "Don't ever underestimate the capacity and value of strong networks. Networking is kind of a give and a take. We know that. It's an exchange of ideas, seeking, providing assistance." It's just making sure that you're on the right track, and that is going to be important moving forward and progressing your own career.

I don't think any of us can predict what the future of the

EA role looks like. None of us can see what the future looks like. I think we need to embrace the technologies; we need to embrace the relationships and use those tools to move forward. Linda, were you talking about training courses?

LINDA SEMMLER:

Yeah.

RHANA CRAGO:

I agree. There are many training courses out there that are available. There are a lot of cookie cutter training courses, as I call them, that probably, yes, charge you two and a half, \$3,000, but aren't really tailored to what we need to know. I would suggest that you do look around and be picky about the kind of training that you do, but it is out there. And in fact, there is one coming up at the APS Academy. So we have a professional EA course coming up, I think on the 3rd of November. And I'm not here to do a sales pitch, but I am saying that there is assistance out there. So I would encourage you to look around and expand your repertoire of tools through some training. But network, network, network. I'm big on networks.

EDWIN ANDERSON:

Thanks, Rhana. A lovely note to finish on. We're going to open up the floor now to a couple of questions. So we've got some IPAA staff members with microphones. If you could say your name and if you're addressing the question to anyone, that would be great, or to the panel. But yeah, welcome. Any questions for our lovely panel?

ANDREW PFEIFFER:

I thought I'd stand up because I'm right at the back. My name's Andrew Pfeiffer I'm from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. I'm not an EA, but I'm interested in this space and becoming an EA or an EO. I'm aware that EAs and EOs are distinct but overlapping roles, as was said on the panel. Some struggle both the EA and the EO roles at the APS 6 and EL 1 level. So my question is how people can move sideways into these sorts of roles, say at the APS 6 EL 1 one level, when they might not have had experience in an executive's office before, and taking a demotion to an APS 3 or an APS 4 entry level EA might not be the most appropriate option for them either.

JACK DOLAN:

I'm happy to start. I was thinking, as Bev was saying, maybe you could be best placed to answer this Bev, given that you spoke about it, but I think it really comes down to the transferable skills. You don't have to... I think there's so much importance on looking outside of the sphere of the APS. There could be someone that's in the private sector, or you could be someone like yourself who's in an APS agency at the moment. I think transferable skills are great. If you do end up in a

position, say as a first time EA or EO, I think harping onto Rhana's point about building your networks, and that's going to be crucial for you, I think.

I wouldn't think that you need to look at a demotion per se, but it's just if you are going into not so much an entry level position, really rely on and understand that if you're in the EA space or the EO space, understand that there's people from the divisions and branches below you that can really be of assistance to you, and there's no harm in saying, look, "I don't know," and to get that advice or support that you need.

LINDA SEMMLER:

Look, it's not totally related, but it is a little bit to do with the EA/EO role. I think a lot of EAs think that EO is the natural transition sometimes when they get up to the higher levels and they want to move to a different level. It's not always the case that it works. Just because you're a fantastic, wonderful EA, you can't always become an EO. They're very, very different skill sets. And I think that's something that needs to be thought about as well. But certainly coming into an EL 1 or an APS 6 EA position would be difficult, I think if you hadn't had the grounding of being an APS 4, APS 5 EA. You would definitely have to have some pretty strong skills to help you into an APS 6 role. There are so few of them anyway. You'd be competing with people that have probably been doing EA all of their life. So it isn't an easy transition, I wouldn't think.

JACK DOLAN:

Yes, it'd certainly be a steep learning curve, I'd think. And I completely agree with Linda's point about a great EA does not always make a great EO. Because I've been in that position myself. I've tried the EO space, and I very quickly learned which lane I prefer to be in.

LINDA SEMMLER:

I did too. I was almost pushed into it. My boss pushed me in it. He said, "I want you to become my EO," and I don't want to become your... But I said to him I would do it for three months. I lasted two, and I said, "Get me back into that job." I missed the calendar. I'm a control freak. I missed the calendar. Somebody else was looking after that calendar. I wanted to look after it. And I'll always be happy. Of course, I get to still do the EO. I have my wonderful chief of staff here, but I get to do her role when she's away and mine. So you still get that experience and that can happen in your roles, and you should encourage that. If you can fill in and do some of the work just to get a taste of it, if you've got that support from your boss, I think that's a good option.

EDWIN ANDERSON:

Thanks, Andrew. Another question?

LIZZIE:

Hi, my name's Lizzie. I'm from ASD. I just wanted to ask in terms of the leadership piece, and it can be

directed at Linda or anyone on the panel, I wanted to ask what your opinions were of... So there's doing as much as you can for people in your branch, but there's also the line of... Oh, I forgot the word now. I just want to check your opinions on, I can't think of the word, setting boundaries and making sure that you're not overworking yourself and taking on too much work, but you're wanting to help everyone at the same time.

BEV SIMS:

I'm happy to take that one. So I think there's supporting your executive and supporting others in your division, and it is difficult to say no sometimes, but my priority is always my executive. So if I have capacity and I've got opportunity, I will of course extend myself to provide support to others. So I think if you think carefully about your role and where your priorities are, think about working smarter, so to free up some of your time, think about where you can add the most value. So we can all do tasks that might not really add value, but they could take time, or tasks that aren't really developing us. So I think when I'm looking at extending myself to support outside my executive, I'm looking for where I can add value the most and where I can grow and learn other experience as well.

So it's a two-way street when you're providing support for others. Yes, we're very happy to do that because we are in support roles, but you also think about what can I gain from this, or if I'm asked to do something, how can I extend that task from what might be a remedial component to something that might extend you a little bit more so you can grow and develop and learn new skills. So it is a balancing act, it is difficult to say no. Sometimes you just have to say, "Unfortunately I haven't got the capacity at the moment, but I'd really like to look for another opportunity later." So don't close the door, and you don't want to be seen as that person that just says no and then sits there and is actually not fully occupied.

I always like to be busy, and I think we all do. We all come to work to do a job. We are very fortunate to work in the public service. We have paying conditions that some people would die for. So I think when we look at the roles that we have, we should be working at full capacity, but we don't want to be working at over capacity when we're not actually delivering what we need to do with a fundamental component of our role. So if I could encourage you just to think about it, and in any response, be as respectful as you can, and I'm sure people will understand we're all in busy roles and we do have from time to time have to push back or think differently about how we're delivering our services.

EDWIN ANDERSON:

Great. Well, I might close the Q&A there. Thank you to

our panel. That was wonderful. And I'd now like to invite Sam back to the stage to close the event.

SAM PALMER:

Thank you so much for such a wonderful conversation. I'm sitting here learning just as much and sucking all that great advice up, so it's been really wonderful, and I can tell people have been really appreciating it as well. Now before we close today, we want to take a moment to present Bev with some flowers to celebrate your valedictory and to thank you so much and express our gratitude for everything that you've done for your colleagues and for us at IPAA and the service.

BEV SIMS:

Sam, can say I something? Thank you so much for the wonderful flowers, for the acknowledgement. I feel a little bit overwhelmed at the moment because I've loved my career, I've had so many opportunities, I've met so many wonderful people, and I thank people today who know me and have made the time and effort to come and hear us all speak about the importance of the EA role. I've done other roles other than EAs, but I always found myself coming back to do this role because it was what I was good at. It's what I got the most out of. And if you can look beyond that, and I would encourage you to look at the EA role, extend yourself, but really see it and respect the role and look for opportunities and to grow and help others around you. If I could leave that as some form of legacy, that would make me very happy today, and I thank you so much for coming.